

Clerk

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The chickens among us: Birds found in more suburban backyards By Larissa Chinwah | Daily Herald StaffContact writer
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[PHOTO] Jeanne Lyon of St. Charles enjoys having chickens as pets and as a source of freshly laid eggs. BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

[PHOTO] Jeanne Lyon helps her son Tim, 8, prepare some of the freshly laid eggs. The Lyon family has joined the growing number of people raising chickens in their suburban backyards. BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

[PHOTO] The fresh egg, top, shows a distinctly different color than the store bought one, bottom. The Lyon family has raised chickens in their suburban backyard for two years. BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

[PHOTO] Tim Lyon, 8, and his brother Arthur, 10, right, prepare to feed the family's six chickens. The Lyon family has raised chickens for two years. BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

[PHOTO] The Lyon family has joined the growing number of people raising chickens in their suburban backyards. The family consumes most of the eggs laid by their pets. BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

[PHOTO] Jeanne Lyon and her son Tim, 8, prepare to visit some of the six chickens that the family keeps as pets. The six birds are part of the Lyon family. BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

[PHOTO] Tim Lyon, 8, prepare some freshly laid eggs. The Lyon family has joined the growing number of people raising chickens in their suburban backyards. BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

[PHOTO] Jeanne Lyon of St. Charles and her 10-year-old son Arthur feed the family's chickens. The Lyon family has joined the growing number of people raising chickens in their suburban backyards. BRIAN HILL | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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The chicken coop built out of a shed and some chicken wire sits next to the vegetable garden plots on the Lyon family's lot. A rooster, standing atop the dark brown compost pile of dirt and food scraps, crows. The hens scratch in the dirt nearby and peck for worms or bugs in the garden.

The Lyons don't live in the country or on a farm. They live near downtown St. Charles.

The family's 120-year-old house is across the street from an elementary school and close to the public library. The four hens and two roosters have free rein over the 100-by-100-foot yard, keeping the grass low and the bugs at bay.

St. Charles is one of a few suburban towns that allow residents to keep chickens in their backyards. But many more, like Batavia, Carpentersville, Elgin, Hanover Park and Lake Forest, ban chickens and other farm animals.

Proponents say raising your own chickens is healthier for your family, the environment and the economy. But critics say chickens can be a problem in neighborhoods with small lots because of the smell and noise, including early morning crowing.

Jeanne Lyon and her husband, Rich, unwittingly became part of the backyard chicken movement two years ago when their three sons bought chicks at the Garfield Farm Museum for \$2 each. They brought home a Silkie rooster and hen, an AmeriCauna and Rose Comb Bantam. Later, two mixed chicks joined the flock.

The family did not consume the eggs at first, but now they prefer the backyard eggs because they have higher nutritional value than store-bought eggs. The eggs from backyard chickens contain Omega-3 fatty acids, as well as Vitamin A and Vitamin D. Plus, Jeanne Lyon adds, with backyard chickens you know what they are eating. Chickens eat any food scraps from orange peels to Big Macs.

The hens lay about four eggs per day.

"It really wasn't the plan, we weren't trying to be trendy," Jeanne Lyon said. "We didn't get the chickens because of the eggs. They make delightful pets and the eggs are a bonus."

In fact, the Lyons allowed the chicks so the boys - Timmy, 8, Arthur, 10, and Zach, 13 - would no longer ask about the puppies for which a neighbor was trying to find homes. Rich Lyon didn't think the chicks would last. But two years later, they are thriving and have become part of the family.

"My favorite part of having chickens is that they are fun to have around and make me feel better," Arthur said. "They are cute and fluffy and they have their own personalities. It is like a person in the body of a chicken."

Jeanne Lyon said the chickens have taught her children about patience and friendship, as well as exposing them to the experiences of life.

But while the Lyon family reaps the benefits of backyard chickens, other families across the Chicago suburbs are working to rewrite ordinances that ban them.

In Hanover Park, Laura Ehorn wants to introduce chickens to her family's backyard. But the village prohibits chickens anywhere in the village. It would cost Ehorn about \$500 to file an application, but that does not guarantee a hearing. It would cost less to risk the \$30 fine, she said.

"I like to teach my kids why we eat the foods we do, as well as why we should not eat others," Ehorn said. "Compost is another, as well as being able to feed the chickens all the vegetable scraps, it is a nice mini-circle of life demo right in the backyard."

David Bedrin misses his chickens. He and his partner, Kyle Holen, moved to Lake Forest two years ago from Madison, Wis., where they raised two chickens. But Lake County requires at least 5 acres to raise any farm animals, including poultry, said Bedrin, who is rallying local support for backyard chickens before taking on the city council.

"I do miss the eggs," Bedrin said. "I crack open the store-bought eggs now and just go 'Ugh.' Backyard chicken eggs are superior; the color is a bright sunshine yellow and the texture is much richer and thicker."

Bedrin said he would like to have chickens not only for the eggs, but to teach their daughter, Veronica Bedrin-Holen, 5, whence the food she eats comes.

"It is a family value and priority that we have to know where our food comes from and what goes into it," Bedrin said. "We grow our own vegetables and she enjoys gardening. When she grows it, she eats it."